Methodological approach for a sexuality education path for adolescents with intellectual disabilities

Dr. Antonio Virgili*

[* Lecturer of Sexology, Sexologist; researcher in Neurosociology; Hon. Judge for Minors]

The realization of a path of sexuality education for adolescents with mental disabilities requires a particular methodological attention, as I highlighted in another article[1]. In fact, the already usual needs for constant adaptation to the type of audience and its prevailing characteristics are added to the even wider diversity of an audience made up of teenagers with intellectual disabilities and the particularities of the relationship of many of them with their families and with their operators following them. The contents will therefore be rendered in accessible and customizable forms, the times and interactive methods of meeting will also be very flexible. We may shortly articulate the methodological approach in the following schematic steps: **1**. General principles and strategy; **2**. Articulation of the phases; **3**. Content.

1. General principles and strategy

The general principles that should guide in the choice of contents and intervention strategies are:

A. tend to promote the autonomy of the recipients;

B. provide skills and information (suitable for recipients) that support their autonomy;
C. suggest and provide adequate models of behavior, giving priority not so much to what "must do" as to define what "is inappropriate or dangerous to do", respecting others and for themselves;
D. consider that sexuality is a normal part of most people's lives;
E. trying to make the idea that sexuality is a complex component of life, with many facets, nuances, implications, emotions, etc. and that therefore it is not only biology, nor only psychology and affects, it is also sociology, relationship, values, perspectives;
F. as indicated in the previous point, drives, desires, behaviors, ideas, fantasies, affections, etc. they should be linked as much as possible not only in the temporal (historical) sense but also in perception, self-perception, awareness, regulation, evaluation of situations, of relationality.
These points should always be underlying the choice of times, contents, strategies and methods

[1] Virgili A., ***Educazione sessuale e adolescenti: il caso dei disabili mentali***, in *Archives of Sexology*, vol. 2019

of action. The result is a complex, more complex, but in some ways not very different, job of what teaching adolescents in general should characterize. Help young adults *in fieri* to the life of the following years, in which they will no longer be "accompanied" constantly by parents or other adults but will have as much as possible and in the best possible way to face alone situations, circumstances and emotions. It is a bit like teaching to ride a bicycle, then everyone will have to and will be able to pedal on their own in the direction and speed that they will consider closest to their personal goals and needs.

1. The articulation of the phases

In schematically indicating the steps through which to organize and define the course, a rough chronological sequence can be indicated, through which the various characteristics of the course, the organizational and operational structure are defined, and the corrective measures required by the specific group of recipients.
The sequence includes:

1. Establishment of a work group, possibly interdisciplinary, which carries out a first development between the basic course and the target group;
2. Meetings with operators to collect information on the group's specific and general situations, on any problems or critical issues, on any previous activities on the topic;
3. General direct recognition of the context, of the places and of the recipients, to better evaluate spaces, availability of teaching equipment, times and methods of participation provided by the structure (reception, school, ...);
4. Brief exploratory-informative meeting with parents to illustrate what it is intended to do, for what objectives and to collect their first reactions;
5. Evaluation of data and information obtained previously, development of the project;
6. Informative-educational meeting with parents, through a poorly structured dialogue, to try to better explain objectives, methods, collect requests, give guarantees;
7. Meetings-dialogues with the recipients of the course [in sequence: collegial, monosexual, collegial] the duration of each of them and the overall number of meetings will be limited in flexibility. The meetings are supposed to be held simultaneously by two experts of different gender, just to overcome any initial obstacles and demonstrate that the involvement must be equal with respect to the gender of the interlocutor. Alternatively, there may be a meeting differentiated by gender at the beginning (girls with expert woman and boys with expert man), but followed by other “mixed” encounters, otherwise less balanced relationships are generated;
8. Final meeting to check the recorded results, the problems that have emerged, the corrections to be considered for subsequent activities.
9. Drafting of a final report

In the articulation of the content one can imagine a typical sequence (i.e. a basic model of

articulation of the intervention), editable and adaptable to specific characteristics and needs. It could include both an incidental (or informal) and structured component. The incidental component could be obtained by leaving indications (cards, forms, drawings, etc.) as a trace to follow for family members and operators and would mainly concern the appropriate or inappropriate behaviours within given situations or daily contexts. The reasons for this have been previously indicated. It may basically be considered a sort of reinforcement and orientation transmitted outside the context of the course, directly in life situations. The structured component, typical of each training course, is that organized on a specific path, with contents largely (but not entirely) predetermined, which takes place in the context of the course/seminar meetings, whatever their modality (individual, for small groups, by gender, collegiate, etc.). The structured part is the one on which the broadest informative and cognitive moments will probably flow, but it would be appropriate that it be coordinated with the incidental or informal one. It is now quite widespread to consider that the speakers on the issues of sexuality towards adolescents should preferably be of the female gender, perhaps in the unexplained hypothesis that in this way a better and "equal" vision of the theme would be communicated. This assumption is not actually documented, any gender distortions can occur whether the speaker is only male or only female. So, it is suggested to preferably entrust the intervention work to a couple of speakers of different gender.

1. Content

The content could be divided into some sets: **B-knowledge**, **emotions and affectivity**, **behaviors**.

The set of B-Knowledge. B-knowledge (B is for Basic and for Biological) includes information on the biological, anatomical, physiological, psychosomatic characteristics related to gender and sexuality. The body, especially in the evolutionary phase of adolescence, begins to become more consistently an instrument of mediation of the relationship with the world. Self-knowledge is also favored by the exploration of one's senses, an experience that enriches one's way of expressing oneself, interpreting and interacting with reality by increasing awareness of tools that are already possessed. The development of the sexual dimension, therefore, goes beyond the subject's body identity since it involves psychological and social identity. In this direction educating about sexuality does not only mean stimulating a gradual awareness of the somatic and physiological characteristics of the two sexes in the adolescents, but above all extending this awareness to the psycho-social aspects that sexuality involves and has within itself. Connected to these aspects, gender education aims to analyze the set of biological differences but also of stereotypes that often define female and male affiliations, with the aim of understanding representations, social roles and regulatory models that impose a schematic and rigid social idea of gender. Furthermore, according to this perspective, working on gender

means acting on models that are transcultural[2] and simultaneously keeping in mind all the possible variations of the difference, in the freedom to reinvent yourself by playing creatively with your own limits. The ultimate goal of gender education is to be comfortable with one's biological identity, whatever one's subjectivity. Last but not least gender education may be a form of prevention of gender-based violence insofar as its main objective is to interrogate the relationship between identity / differences / gender relations and cultural and social stereotypes and to encourage the adoption of anti-violent identification models and relationship, starting from a model of equal dignity between men and women.

The set of emotions and affectivity. It illustrates the differences between personal knowledge, friendship, emotional relationship, love, etc., as well as some exercises to understand what the main emotions are, how to differentiate them and, as far as possible, how to manage them. Affectivity and emotions education have the aim of developing emotional intelligence starting from the awareness of one's feelings, emotions, and feelings and to increase affective skills with the aim of promoting a good interpersonal relationship. The main affective abilities are awareness and the distinction between perceiving, feeling and acting, the control of emotional impulses and the awareness of the consequences of one's actions, the ability to share one's feelings and understand those of others. Being emotions, mind and body, in mutual interaction, talking about emotions means talking about sexuality as well: physiological change brings with it emotional-affective experiences which, if mentalized, are then put at the service of relationships with the other sex. In order for education to emotions and affectivity to be a form of prevention of gender-based violence, it is necessary to address the relationship between affectivity, gender identity and cultural stereotypes so as the contemporary deconstructing images and representations that may become new stereotypes and regulatory models.

The set of behaviors should illustrate which are the most appropriate situations for given behaviors, what should be avoided (inappropriate behaviors), how to face another person (touch, embrace, kiss, etc.) according to the existing relationship with that person and the environmental context, etc. This general content should be compared to the specific characteristics of the group and, if possible, individual characteristics (imagining a job with a group that is not too numerous). Behaviors include individual ones, which help to ensure greater safety and improvements in the perception of oneself, one's body and the possibilities of individual autonomy. And relational and social behaviors, always important to understand in adolescence and which in these cases also have the value of a relative challenge against the prejudices connected to disabilities. Improving the relational possibilities between disabled and non-disabled as well as among the various disabled themselves is obviously a non-priority objective in the context of a seminar on sexuality but it remains a milestone for the life of young disabled

[2] The problems of foreign disabled adolescents living in a Country different from the home Country of origin has very rarely been considered. On the other hand, also for not disabled adolescents it is today a need to consider some cultural and ethnic differences too in an educational course on sexuality.

people. Each area will use images, drawings, examples, theatricalization, etc. such as to make the contents as accessible as possible, considering the individual characteristics and disabilities. The transmission methodology could be discursive, scenic, in the form of a game, etc., the possibilities are manifold. Individual or collective needs and requests, and the available capacities, obviously constitute three constant filters through which to develop the educational intervention on sexuality. Lightness, respect and patience have to be constant in the approach.

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